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A Christian Ecology of Death

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The 1975 Faculty Lecture

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A CHRISTIAN ECOLOGY OF DEATH:

Biblical Imagery and "The Ecologic Crisis"

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> Be praised, my Lord, for our sister, Bodily Death, whom no living man can escape.
>
> --St. Francis of Assisi

> The principle of Hell: Eat or be eaten;
> The principle of Heaven: Eat and be eaten.
>
> --Bertholt Brecht

> Theodicy is for people with strong stomachs.
>
> --Robert Farrar Capon

I. The Problem: Theological Dilemma in Ecological Vision

Among the great discoveries of our century has been the recognition that the various forms of life on this planet are intricately related to their environment and to each other. The young science of ecology has enabled us to understand empirically what an amateur naturalist declared intuitively a hundred years ago: "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe." Aldo Leopold describes this relatedness in terms of "the biotic pyramid":

> Each successive layer depends on those below it for food and often for other services, and each in turn furnishes food and services to those above. Proceeding upwards, each successive layer decreases in numerical abundance. Thus, for every carnivore there are hundreds of his prey, millions of insects, uncountable plants. . . .The lines of dependency for food and other services are called food chains. . . .Each species, including ourselves, is a link in many chains. . . .The pyramid is a tangle of chains so complex as to seem disorderly, yet the stability of the system proves it to be a highly organized structure. Its functioning depends on the co-operation and competition of its diverse parts.[1]

The ecologists are showing us that life is a flowing, cycling network of energy: what affects the plankton affects the whale; the springs on a forest hillside release their water to rivers slowly because the water is held by humus which is anchored by a forest which is healthy because the cougars keep the deer from girdling the trees. Both deer and cougar breathe oxygen which the trees produce, and the trees "breathe" carbon dioxide exhaled by the animals. In this, and in countless other ways, the food, air and water which sustain all life are produced and kept pure by the planet's fragile fountain of life.

This intricate relatedness of life has been brought home to us with great power in the past decade. Our most vivid single reminder that the earth is, in a sense, a single, living organism has been the photographs brought back from space by our handful of astronauts. Those images of a fragile, blue-green world rising above a gray horizon never blessed with life has registered deeply in the imaginations of millions.

But more important even than those unifying photographs has been our accelerating recognition that the planet's newly-discovered unity is being disrupted by man himself. Tired as we are of hearing of oil-soaked ducks, nuclear wastes, and DDT in the food chain, we must continue to face the fact that the natural balance of the planet has been upset--perhaps irrevocably--by human activity.

Various attempts have been made to place the blame for this recent, rapid deterioration of the natural environment. That blame has been placed on increasing population, on a rapid growth in technology, on the scientific revolution, on Western Imperialism, on male chauvinism. No doubt all of these factors have contributed. But I wish now to consider another frequently-cited force behind environmental deterioration: Christianity.

The most widely-quoted of these indictments of Christianity's effect on the natural environment is a now-famous address by Lynn White, published in 1967 in Science and now reprinted widely. "In its Western form," says White, "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen."[2] Unlike other religions, Christianity stresses that man is not simply a part of nature. His body may be made of the same fertile dust which sustains the animals, but his soul is not of the earth: it is modeled after God, and bound for Him. Other critics take the argument much further than White. The producers of the influential Club of Rome study, Limits to Growth, write of an "age-old concept of man, one firmly rooted in Judeo-Christian tradition and newly strengthened by stunning technical achievements in the last few centuries." According to this Christian-rooted belief, the writers continue, "Homo Sapiens is a very special creature whose unique brain gives him not only the capability but the right to exploit for his own short-term purposes all other creatures and all resources the world has to offer."[3]

Thus, the argument goes, the Christian sees himself as free to exploit nature, for his destiny is not with nature, but with God: his earthly existence is important mainly as a setting in which to determine what spiritual realm he will spend eternity in.

It can be well-argued, on several grounds, that such an unearthly Christianity is also unbiblical. Christianity teaches not the immortality of the soul, but the resurrection of the body. The doctrine of Creation pictures God as repeatedly declaring the goodness of the mutable earth. Likewise, the doctrine of the Incarnation suggests a further vindication of the fleshly and the material. The whole Biblical story is of a God who works through time and matter. In such ways could be refuted the charge that Christianity is too spiritually oriented to be concerned with the physical environment.

But there is another, seldom-recognized element in Christian thought which has contributed much to Western man's failure to think in terms of the ecosystem: that is, the teaching that death is evil, and the result of sin. Such a teaching makes it particularly hard for a Christian to see the world as ultimately good. The various food chains which keep the world ecosystem in trim are all forged by death. Not only does food depend upon death, but death and decay are essential checks on the exponential growth of unmolested life. Genesis suggests that this fecundity is God-given. To all life God declares, "Be fruitful and multiply." So overwhelmingly well-obeyed is that command to multiply that one biologist has estimated that "a lone aphid, without a partner, breeding 'unmolested' for one year would produce so many living aphids that, although they are only a tenth of an inch long, together they would extend into space twenty-five hundred light years."[4] Obviously, such God-given fecundity is monstrous if it is not balanced by death: but Christians have been reluctant to list death among the goods of God's creation.

It is both fecundity and voraciousness which keeps our planet whole. Organisms eat in order to live, and are in turn eaten. On first comprehending the intricacy of these mechanisms through which creation is sustained, a Christian is apt to echo the Psalmist: "The ecosystem declares the glory of God, and the food chains ring with his handiwork." But a closer look reveals that the whole structure is bound together by the agony of one thing being eaten by another. And seeing this, the Christian is apt to sit like Job in sackcloth and ashes, wishing he had never been born.

For we are not reconciled to death. We are not prepared to see it as a part of the created order. The normal Christian reading of Scripture sees death as the result of sin: death is the promised result of human disobedience, and human disobedience results not only in human death, but in the ultimate deaths of all things. Delivery from sin is equated with delivery from death. Presumably, when there is no more sin on earth, there will be no more death. But, the ecologist hastens to add, there will be no more life either. To quote Leopold again,

> Land, then, is not merely soil; it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants and animals. Food chains are the living channels which conduct energy upward; death and decay return it to the soil. (The emphasis is mine.)[5]

Every form of life we know or can imagine is sustained by this fountain of energy; remove death, and the fountain dries up. Thus in mutual destruction, the garden earth is maintained.

Walt Whitman caught this painful paradoxicality of life when he wrote "This Compost," a poem about the inter-relationships between life and death which expresses both our horror at the ubiquity of death and our delight at the life which grows from it:

> O how can it be that the ground itself does not sicken?
> How can you be alive you growths of spring?
> How can you furnish health you blood of herbs, roots, orchards, grain?
> Are they not continually putting distemper'd corpses within you?
> Is not every continent work'd over and over with sour dead?
> . . . .

> Behold this compost.' behold it well!
> Perhaps every mite has once form'd part of a sick person--yet behold!
> The grass of spring covers the prairies,
> The bean bursts noiselessly through the mold in the garden,
> The delicate spear of the onion pierces upward,
> The apple-buds cluster together on the apple branches,
> The resurrection of the wheat appears with pale visage out of its graves.[6]

The Christian who attempts to live in harmony with the natural systems of the world is thus up against a very difficult problem: for that harmony depends upon death, which Christian theology seems to see as a result of sin. The very creation which God made and called good is increasingly recognized as energized by things dying: a dying sun gives heat to a dying plant which gives food to herbivores who die to feed carnivores, who are eaten before and after death by bacteria who themselves die in incomprehsnible numbers. A basic principle of the universe seems to be the condition stated as the second law of thermodynamics: Energy tends to dissipate; there is no completely efficient heat engine. To maintain its life, all organisms must take energy from other organisms, in a process which can only end in the heat-death of the universe. Anne Dillard, a contemporary poet, has put it this way:

> The world has signed a pact with the devil; it had to. It is a covenant to which everything, even every hydrogen atom, is bound. The terms are clear: if you want to live, you have to die. The world came into being with the signing of the contract. . . .[7]

This paper is an attempt to explore, and not necessarily to solve, this ancient problem, in the hopes that it will shed some light on the relationship between Christianity and current environmental problems. My method is, first, through considering the key Biblical symbolism of food and eating, to point to an apparent affirmation of life-through-death which is at odds with the more common categorical linking by Christians of death with sin. Second, I would like to point to a theological vision, best seen in the work of Charles Williams, which enables us to understand how "good death" should be part of a thoroughly Christian world-view.

For those who maintain that such imponderables are beyond the fringe of both piety and scholarship, I take some comfort from the story of Job. Job obstinately refuses to accept the conventional wisdom of his comforters when they try to make all death and pain a punishment for sin. And when the divine voice from the whirlwind finally speaks, he commends that obstinate questioning. As Charles Williams says, an assertion that such theodicies are not suitable fare for human meditation "has been used too often by the pious to encourage them to say, in love or in laziness, 'Our little minds were never meant. . .' Fortunately, there is the book of Job to make it clear that our little minds were meant. Man was intended to argue with God."[8]

On the other hand, to guard against any confidence that we might win such arguments, I have Job's words after the whirlwind has spoken its dreadful answers. Those answers are nothing less than a fresh look at the violence, intricacy and beauty of the world, and Job responds to them by saying, "I have spoken of great things which I have not understood: things too wonderful for me to know." (Job 42:2-3)

A starting point for this investigation is the determination of whether or not the consumption that goes on in the food chain can indeed be called death. Is "death" a subjective state which can only be experienced by self-conscious creatures--men, and perhaps marginally, some of the higher animals? Some have maintained so: that the sting of extinction is reflective anticipation, a characteristic only of humans.[9]

Excluded as we are from the perceptions of other living things, it is impossible to answer the question adequately. We know that animals suffer, and seek to avoid suffering. The analogy between their behavior and our own makes that clear. That such suffering and death presents a problem to "lower" animals, insects, and plants is not so clear. Reports of plant sentience are inconclusive at best. But it is clear that resistance to destruction is "built in" on the lowest levels of life. In fact, a frequently-cited minimum criterion of life is irritability: the capacity to shrink from stimuli that could harm. Thus it will simply not do to dismiss plant and animal death as irrelevant to human concern. Yet so sensitive a thinker as C.S. Lewis comes to this conclusion. Says Lewis, "The fact that vegetable lives 'prey upon' one another and are in a state of 'ruthless' competition is of no moral importance at all. 'Life' in the biological sense has nothing to do with good and evil until sentience appears."[10] The obvious resistance of all life to death makes it difficult to hold thus that lower death doesn't matter.

For most of the finely-honed mechanisms of animal life are defenses against death. Much of what we call "beauty" in the natural world is the result of such resistance. As is often the case, a poet has best expressed the philosophical significance of this biological fact:

> What but the wolf's tooth chiseled so fine
> The fleet limbs of the antelope?
> What but fear winged the birds and hunger
> Gemmed with such eyes the great goshawk's head?[11]

Whether other living organisms are conscious of death is really not the issue: the obvious fact is that survival is the highest good for all living things (except, perhaps, men), and the relatedness of creation continually thwarts the achievement of that good. The immense variety and fecundity of plant and animal life can be seen as an effort to insure survival: to keep one's self and one's seed from becoming food for another frantically surviving organism. The very richness of life which we traditionally associate with Eden is a response to this need for either getting food or avoiding becoming food.

II. Biblical Imagery of Eating and Death

Man, from the beginning, is placed squarely in the midst of this garden of defenses and devouring: "I give you all plants that bear seed everywhere on earth. . . .they shall be yours for food. All green plants I give for food to the wild animals." (Gen. 1:29-30) It is worth noting here that carniverosity--the eating of animal flesh--is not mentioned. This omission may or may not be construed as an argument in favor of vegetarianism. But unless we completely abandon the evidence from the fossil record of life, we must acknowledge that there was carniverosity--with all its bloodshed and pain--long before man's appearance. Not all dinosaurs were vegetarians. And the principle--devouring

the stored energy of life in order to sustain life--is the same, whether the meal is animal or vegetable (or, for that matter, mineral: even plants deplete the soil). Vegetarianism does not loose us from the bloody tree of life. As Capon says:

> Even a vegetarian creation is no answer. It is only our human chauvinism that is satisfied when literal bloodshed is ruled out. . .the lettuces still, in their own way, take a dim view of having to cease being lettuces; as they can, they fight it. One of the deepest mistakes in theology is to start our discussions of the major activities of creation too high. We act as if only man were free, only man had knowledge, only man were capable of feeling. That is not only false, it is mischievious. It makes man a lonely exception to the tissue of creation, rather than a part of its hierarchy.[12]

And though it can indeed be argued that man's rationality, spirituality, and his language make him separate from nature, we cannot deny that such separateness is nourished by "the tissue of creation." And though the excessive spiritualizing of the sermonic tradition has tended to obscure the fact, this dependence of human spirituality on "the tissue of creation" is nowhere more obvious than in the Bible. One is tempted to say that the Bible is <u>about</u> food; but it would be less misleading to say that food, its preparation and consumption, is the source of some of the Bible's main metaphors. Since I am dealing in this study with the theological problem caused by this necessity of all things to eat (and thus, to kill and die) let us examine the Biblical treatment of this most direct and dramatic participation in the food chain.

We have already begun with the necessity of eating in Eden. It is important here that we recognize the importance of the obvious: that man is described as being, in his original relationship to the rest of creation, an eater. That he was intended to <u>eat</u> his garden, not just smell the flowers, is clearly stated in Genesis. Alexander Schmemann, an Eastern Orthodox theologian, makes a valuable comment on this idea of Eden as food:

> In the Biblical story of creation, man is presented, first of all as a hungry being and the whole world as his food. Second only to the direction to propagate and have dominion over the earth, God instructs men to eat of the earth: "Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed. . .and every tree which is the fruit of a tree bearing seed. . .to you it shall be for meat. . ." Man must eat in order to live; he must take the world into his body and transform it into himself, into flesh and blood. He is indeed that which he eats, and the whole world is presented as one all-embracing banquet table for man.[13]

Genesis thus presents eating as a means, from the beginning, for man to participate in the life of creation. Even if that eating were limited to the consumption of seeds and fruits, such devouring would necessarily decrease the reproductive potential of the thing eaten, and so contribute to a kind of death. But the repeated declaration of the goodness of creation forces us to assume that these Edenic deaths, on all levels, were <u>good</u> deaths: part of the harmonious pattern of exchanged life which God made and declared good.

Yet we must confront the mystery of freedom through which such good death acquires its sting. It is significant that the Genesis account presents the

misuse of that freedom also in terms of eating. The fatal food which was eaten in Eden was indeed food: a part of the chain of life which supports all life. It was, however, from "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." That designation suggests that eating the fruit consists in part of a decision to know as evil the exchanges necessary for life. Charles Williams observes that the act "was merely the wish to know antagonism in the good, to find out what the good would be like if a contradiction were introduced into it. Man desired to know schism in the universe."[14] Or, as a commentator on Williams observes,

> So the rhythm of day and night was and is good, but man hid in caves to escape the one and built fires against the other. By so doing he did not change the character of either day or night: they remained what they were, and their goodness was established in the foundations of the world. But man opposed the facts. He knew them as evil. He knew the good in and through his rejection of it.[15]

A part of this alteration in knowledge was, I suggest, a shift to seeing death and temporality not as a part of the freely received good, but instead as a rejected good--and therefore, as an evil. Thus the larger garden of the earth becomes to man a wilderness of thorns and briars: something to be set against, to overcome.[16]

In the history which follows--a history which includes not only the whole Bible, but all of human history, the death which in the garden was a part of the harmony of life becomes the central human problem. To avoid it, man inflicts death cruelly and unnecessarily on both humanity and nature: a nature which is now seen as opposite: an enemy, and the source of death. It may not be that the Fall brought death into the world, but that at the Fall, death became an enemy. Unable to face his own death, yet fearing its approach through every moment of his consciousness, man increasingly inflicts death on everything else in an attempt to escape from the reality of death which is the condition of his life, his link with all life. Much of what we call human civilization may be seen as a hedge against death: the more we deny its necessity, the more it becomes our enemy.

Necessarily, even man's communication with God comes to depend on death--from the beasts which must die to cover his nakedness, to Abel's bloody, but acceptable sacrifice. Because death is the one thing which man will not accept, it is made the means for the re-established communion between God and man: the one thing man will have to accept. To quote Charles Williams again:

> Man, having got himself into a state where he was capable of willingly shedding blood, the shedding of blood could no longer be neglected. That pouring out of the blood "which is life" was bound to become a central thing, for it was the one final and irrevocable thing.[17]

Thus man, who had been from the first a priest, lifting life into consciousness by simply partaking of it, becomes a bloodier kind of priest, deliberately sacrificing. But the goodness, the life-giving necessity of the sacrifice, are evident from the beginning. This sacrifice necessary for deliverance is also a meal: we are still in the world that was given us for food, but our consciousness has raised death to a more central place--as in the Passover meal, and all that it symbolized, and continues to symbolize:

> All the assembled community of Israel shall slaughter the victim between dusk and dark. They must take some of the blood and smear it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of every house in which they eat the lamb. On that night they shall eat the flesh roast on the fire; they shall eat it with unleavened cakes and bitter herbs. You are not to eat any of it raw or even boiled in water, but roasted, head, shins, and entrails. (Ex. 12:6-10)

Under its millenia-long overlay of accumulated meaning, it is easy to forget that those spotless lambs were slain at dusk in Egypt for two linked reasons: one was to provide protection from the angel of death, symbolized by the blood on the doorpost and lintel; the other, and often forgotten reason, was to provide a meal: protein for the journey that was to come. In the Passover, the Hebrews took part in the act of eating by which all live things derive their life from death, and so participate in the interlinked life of the ecosystem. The means for deliverance from spiritual and physical bondage are thus linked to eating: participation in life through death. All things in Eden had been given men for food. But men determined to know as evil the death required by his participation in the world's feast. Thus in the Passover meal we see the feast focussed into a kind of significance which makes the eater aware of how thoroughly his life is linked with death.

Sacrifice and eating--feasts of deliverance based on death--are thus central to the priestly ritual which expresses Old Testament religion. In Leviticus the priestly representatives of the people (Aaron and his sons) are told in bloody detail not only to kill but to feast: "Boil the flesh of the ram at the entrance to the Tent of the Presence, and eat it there." (Lev. 8:31) The death which, in Eden, was brought into such terrible focus, is experienced vicariously by the people, in the Levitic sacrifices. The sacrifice is symbolically their death, yet the people experience that death--through their representatives, the priests--as a feast. The fact that the sacrifice (which is the emblem of the death always necessary for life) can be experienced as a feast suggests a tentative healing of that alteration in knowledge which has made man see death as bad.

This Biblical feasting continues. From the shadow of exile and destruction, Isaiah speaks, for example, of the continuation of the Edenic banquet in a restored kingdom. And though that kingdom is in other places imaged as a place where the wolf lies down with the lamb and the lion shall eat straw like the ox (images which suggest an incomprehensible deliverance from the necessities of death which maintain life) here the image of the feast clearly includes the eating of animals: "In this mountain shall the Lord of hosts make for all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the less well-refined." (Isa. 25:6)

Though the Hebrew word for "fat" could conceivably apply to vegetable or dairy fats, the amplification which adds that the fat things are "full of marrow" makes plain that this feast in a restored Eden does not abandon the exchanges of life which maintain the ecosystem.

Starting, then, with the garden of creation which was given to people for food, moving through the Passover meal and the Levitical ritual feasts, which remind their participants of the life-giving necessities of death, climaxing

in the hope of feasting in a kingdom of restored goodness: in all these banquets which the Old Testament pictures God as spreading before His people, it is clear that God intends for man to eat. This ritual eating, like the eating which sustains life all through the earth's living web, depends upon other life. The dark shadow of all these images of feasting is the death which makes the feast possible. Old Testament imagery is clear in its suggestion that death is necessary for life. There is little, if any suggestion that death is categorically the result of sin.

These presentations of food and eating as symbols of the necessary connection between death and life become more frequent and explicit in the New Testament. I will consider the idea through the examination of three sets of imagery: imagery of the Lord's supper in the synoptic gospels; imagery of food and eating in the Gospel according to John; and the apolcalyptic imagery of feasting and food found in the book of Revelation.

A word is necessary here on methodology, for I am going to draw some rather unusual conclusions from some familiar passages. Accordingly, let me list three premises on which I am operating. I am not going to argue for these principles here, but refer the reader to several works which, lying on the boundary between literature and religion, define methods of interpretation similar to mine. In particular, I am drawing on the insights of Owen Barfield in Poetic Diction, Philip Wheelwright in The Burning Fountain, and Roger Funk in Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God, especially chapter 5, "The Parable as Metaphor."[18]

First, I am proceeding from a recognition of the obvious fact that much of the teaching of Scripture is explicitly metaphorical: that one "truth" or reality is presented in terms of another (as, for example, in Jesus' declaration that he is the door of the sheepfold.)

Second, it is my assumption that many of these metaphors are neither arbitrary nor decorative, but, like other great human utterance, they present an understanding of reality which could not be arrived at in any other way. Finally, I am basing my assertions on a principle which, though neglected in most of Protestant thought, has been and continues to be important in the life of the church. It could be called "Incarnational sacramentalism," and is stated eloquently by Owen Barfield (in a commentary on the thought of Coleridge):

> We cannot comprehend nature without first having grasped that the whole may be "in" each part, besides being composed of all its parts. . .We cannot understand the Old Testament, for we cannot comprehend any significant historical record, without first having grasped the fact that particular events, or particular stretches of history may be symbols of the whole. And we cannot comprehend the New Testament, unless we have also understood that we are confronted with the paradigm of all symbol both in space and time.[19]

That "paradigm of all symbol" is of course Jesus understood as the Christ: the Incarnate Word of God. What I am suggesting is that if Christians (and I am a Christian) take the Incarnation seriously as a revelation of the Truth which informs the universe, then we must take metaphors more seriously. For God's presence in Jesus is the supreme metaphor: a union of "vehicle" and

"tenor" which makes it impossible for us to ever again say casually "it's just a metaphor." I realize the necessity for caution here: in most metaphors it is still necessary to distinguish vehicle from tenor. But the particularity of the Incarnation suggests that we must take the vehicles of metaphors--and particularly, of Christ's metaphors--as not completely arbitrary. Particularly when those metaphors occur in clearly related clusters, I think we may draw from them some tentative conclusions about the nature of the physical existence which embodies any metaphor's meaning.

One need not acknowledge Jesus as the Word of God to recognize that such an understanding provides, for Christendom, the basis for a view of both language and nature which is much more congenial to the concept of the "ecosystem" than is the more frequent Protestant view which regards the symbols of Scripture as arbitrary signs, whose meaning is entirely imposed from without.

Moving from these premises, let us turn now to a consideration of some of the New Testament imagery which affirms a view of death somewhat different from the one normally connected with Christian thought (but which has nevertheless long been a part of Christian thought).

We begin with "The Lord's Supper"--that feast recorded in each of the synoptic gospels, whose re-enactment has always been considered by Christendom to contain the heart of the Gospel:

> While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many." he said. (Mark 14:22-24)

Before anything else, it is important to recognize the fact that in this feast Christianity, like Judaism, has centered its worship on <u>eating</u>. And though the eviscerated wafers, crackers or bread cubes of the modern mass or communion service work against such an understanding, the feast of the "Lord's Supper" can, like all our meals, be a reminder of our necessary assimilation of other life. The bread is from grain which will, because it is eaten, never bring forth fruit; the wine is from crushed grapes. In that feast, as do all live things at their feasting, Christians assimilate other life in order to live. Thus, before we go any further, we must remember that "The Lord's Supper" is on the most literal level a meal, and a reminder, to its eaters, of their place at the table of life.

Of course the Lord's supper is more than another meal. Though we may think of it in strictly vegetarian terms, its meaning is bound up with the Passover feast. It takes place on "the day of Unleavened Bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. Jesus sent Peter and John saying, 'Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover.'" "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us," say the liturgies, and thus recognize that the Christian "communion" is not unrelated to that bloodier, more ancient ritual whose ecological symbolism we have already discussed.

But the bloodiness, the paradox of the Lord's supper becomes yet more extreme. Here is the man whom Christians have called the Life of the world,

saying of the bread, the wine, "This is my body, this is my blood; eat it; drink it." Again, the weight of repetition has pressed most of the juice from those words. Dorothy Sayers, in the notes to her play on this scene from the gospels, reminds us of some of the horror with which those words would probably have been heard by the first disciples:

> We associate them with "Early-Morning-Service," and "the-beautiful-simplicity-of the Roman/Anglican/Free Church rite" and "having a good number of communicants," being on the Electoral Role of the Parish Church, and all that sort of thing--but what must they have sounded like against the background of the Jewish Temple sacrifices with their daily, weekly, monthly slaughters, and the Passover rites, and the blood sprinkled on the doorposts; and with the living man whom you had eaten, drunk, talked, laughed and lived with for the past two or three years sitting there beside you?[20]

Though centuries of repetition make it difficult to see, in these words Jesus is making a powerful statement about the mystery which, whether we like it or not, underlies the possibility of life in a finite world. This meal is not only literal food; it is a symbol of the ultimate and necessary connection between life and death. Wars have been fought over the meaning of these words, but certainly one of their meanings is that the full life of the world cannot be experienced apart from death.

But for a fuller understanding of the ecological significance of the Lord's supper, it is necessary to turn to the account which provides its richest context: that is, the Gospel according to John. One of the great curiosities of the New Testament is the differences between the synoptic gospels and the Gospel of John. And one of the most notable of those differences is (in the words of Leon Morris) "the surprising fact that, though his account of the events in the upper room is much the fullest of the four we have, he says nothing about the institution of the Holy Communion."[21] However, though John omits an account of that episode in which Jesus declares his flesh to be food, his gospel is remarkable for the frequency and power of the metaphors which speak of Jesus as some form of food. It is as though the force of the eucharistic declaration had been embodied in the whole narrative: it has heightened the selectivity of the writer to the point that he includes in his narrative expressions which show that throughout his whole life among them, Jesus was declaring to the disciples the principle of substitutionary death which became explicit only at the Last Supper.

That the declarations Christ makes about himself in this gospel are to be understood as a declaration also of the principles through which the life of the world operates is made evident by the Prologue:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. . .the true light that gives light to every man who comes into the world." (John 1:1-4, 9)

Much has been written on the meaning which John intends with the word Logos, "Word," But commentators are fairly agreed that, in addition to the obvious sense of declaration or utterance (that is, the whole message of Christ, including the things he says about himself as the food of the world), two other

ideas were likely to have been present in the thought of John and his first audience. One is the widespread Hellenic idea of the Word as "the creative energy. . .the all-pervading principle of the universe."[22] This idea is at least as old as Heraclitus, but it was a prominent element in the later Hellenic Judaism of Philo. Still, the Hellenic understanding of Logos, though present, was probably not the most important aspect of the word. As Morris says,

> The average man would not know its precise significance to the philosophers (any more than his modern counterpart knows what the scientist understands by, say "nuclear fission"). But he would know that it meant something very important. John could scarcely have used the Greek term without arousing in the minds of those who used the Greek language thoughts of something supremely great in the universe.[23]

This numinous Hellenic suggestion of the Logos as something "supremely great in the universe" is focussed most precisely by the Hebrew understanding of the word. In the prologue, reference to the Hebrew creation account is clearly made: instead of "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," John writes, "In the beginning was the Word. . .Through him all things were made." Since the Hebrew creation account repeatedly sees the world as the product of God's word (And God said. . .) it is likely that a main meaning of the word Logos for John and his original audience is the creative, ordering power of God: the second person of the Trinity, of whom Paul writes, in Colossians, "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." (Col. 1:17)

Thus the underlying principle of the Gospel of John is that the Jesus of whom it bears witness is himself the creative, organizing principle of "the cosmos": the universe. In Jesus, therefore, Christians would expect to see demonstrated the principles pertinent not to the understanding of man alone, but to an understanding of the principles which sustain the whole world which the Word creates. It is John's conception of Jesus (and Christianity has followed it) that this man, in one way an ordinary Galilean, embodies the principle by which the world lives.

Jesus is presented as the pattern in which the world's life coheres. Thus it may not be too much to suggest that in the Johannine metaphors of Jesus as the source of food, we may discern a Christian acceptance of that exchange of life through death which sustains the world. The Incarnation itself--"The Word become flesh, dwelling among us"--is the main symbol of this participation in and vindication of natural processes. Lewis sums up well the thoroughness of this Biblical understanding of the Divine presence in the world:

> In the Christian story, God descends to reascend. He comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity; down further still, if embryologists are right, to recapitulate in the womb ancient and pre-human phases of life, down to the very roots and seabed of the Nature He has created.[24]

If we take seriously this Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, then we must agree that Christians have been saying (implicitly, to be sure) that Jesus recapitulates the whole scale of the food chain, from the single cell of the egg through the fish-like early foetus, and on to the full-grown man. Likewise, if the evolutionist is correct, Christians can see the cells of Christ's body

itself as related through time to the non-human forms of life which are presumably the "dust of the earth" from which man was made. And finally, Jesus' very presence in this world of food, air and water meant that he ate, breathed, and drank of that continually repurifying corruption which Walt Whitman called "This Compost," but which the creating Word delights in calling Good.

Since, in fact, John's teaching is that Jesus is himself the principle which underlies Life, let us look at John's many references to the eating, death and nourishment imaged in Jesus.

John reports Jesus as saying to the Samaritan woman at the well that he can give water which will cause the drinker to never thirst again. (John 4:15) In another passage John is more explicit in showing that Jesus himself is this water of life. John reports Jesus as saying, "If a man is thirsty, let him come to me and drink." (John 7:37) Earthly life depends upon water, and though in this utterance water obviously stands for more than ordinary physical life, our understanding of the importance of water to all life gives a power and aptness to this link between Jesus the maker, and Jesus the water.

This link is even clearer when we look at the first miracle in John's Gospel: the transformation of water into wine. It can be argued, as Augustine did, that this miracle amounted to no more than speeding up of the natural processes which every year and, through the billion-fold bacterial deaths of fermentation, change it into wine. Thus Christ the maker changes the living water, through the death of countless organisms, into wine, the drink that later is imaged as his blood, and thus connects his life with the death which gives life.

The same sort of thing is evident with bread. Jesus makes bread as he makes wine, instantaneously accomplishing the miracle of growth which has produced every grain of the wheat crushed for the flour. So fertile is that process that, in John's account, twelve baskets of scraps remain. (Lewis sees in the multiplication of the fish the same fecundity that supports the food chain: ". . .it was He who at the beginning commanded all species 'to be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth.' And now, that day, at the feeding of the thousands, incarnate God does the same: does close and small, under his Human hands, a workman's hands, what He has always been doing in the seas, the lakes and the little brooks.[25])

As is the case with the water, Jesus declares that the source of this bread is himself: that to eat the crushed, baked wheat, to drink the crushed, fermented wine, is to eat of him. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If a man eats of this bread he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." (John 6:31) Schmemann says of this passage:

> Since God has created the world as food for us and has given us food as means of communion with Him, as life in Him--the new food of the new life which we receive from God in His Kingdom is Christ Himself. He is our bread--because from the very beginning, all our hunger was a hunger for Him and all our bread was a symbol of Him, a symbol that had to become reality.[26]

We must not forget the physicality of this bread which is Jesus' body: according to Christianity, it was Jesus' death which made that food available to us. Likewise, it is crushing and death which makes any wheat food: all food demands the destruction of itself, if it is to be food. The earthiness of this process does not escape John, who records Jesus' further words: "Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me." (John 6:57) The verb here translated "feed" (trōgō) is different from the other words for "eat" in the passage. It may best be translated by some such animalistic word as "gnaw," "munch" or "crunch." There is no mistaking that this life-giving bread is physical: it is to be eaten as live things eat dead things all through creation. John presents Jesus as literal food: and we may see in that portrayal a powerful image of the goodness of the eating which sustains all life.

Thus far, in the discussion of the significance of imagery of food in John, the death behind that food has been only implicit. But back of these images of bread as Christ's body--or of Christ's body as bread--we find one very clear statement which declares that death is necessary for life.

The declaration is made by Jesus about himself. It occurs at the beginning of Passion week, in response to a request by certain Greeks to see Jesus. That episode (since the Greeks were Gentiles) is often seen as a symbol of the imminent widening of Jesus' ministry, through death, to include the whole world. Instead of speaking to the Greeks directly, he declares:

> I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the gound and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. (John 12:24-25)

In these words, of course, Jesus is referring to himself, and the death which he knows is coming. As Augustine observed, "He spake of Himself. He Himself was the grain that had to die, and be multiplied; to suffer death through the unbelief of the Jews, and to be multiplied in the faith of many nations."[27] But though the context makes it plain that Jesus is referring mainly to himself, we need not regard his choice of metaphor as superficial. We have already noted the importance of Jesus' repeated imagery of himself as <u>food</u>--bread which comes from wheat as the result of another kind of death. There is an earthy power to this pattern of imagery which seems to declare, through the Flesh of Jesus himself, that the principle which ecologists have told us is central to life is indeed centered on Jesus.

In summary, we see that the gospels present Jesus as the creative, energizing principle of creation, and that the relationship to that creation which his main metaphors portray shows him as <u>food</u>. Through these images--of bread, of wine, of water--Jesus seems to affirm the idea of the necessity of death as a nourisher of life. Christians have understandably seen mainly the "spiritual" significance of these utterances, but there remains in the imagery a strong suggestion of the identification of Christ with natural processes. This is an unmistakable corollary of Jesus' declarations about himself as food: "The true bread that came down from heaven."

Again, the Biblical account pictures the relationship between God and man as taking place through eating. From Eden on, God provides a meal for man which implicitly reaffirms the goodness of the food chain. Of course, the meals God spreads for people are more than protein. But they are at least that, and Christ's linking of himself with the grain of wheat which brings forth fruit in dying suggests that we should not ignore the illumination which Jesus' death provides on all that pyramid of life.

There remains one major cluster of imagery which relates God to food, and thus to the ecosystem. This is found in the Apocalypse, the book of unveilings. In that book, Christ is portrayed, even in his glory, as a slain lamb--in this way referring back to the multitude of sacrificial meals through which one life gives up its life for another. Thus Revelation 4:6 speaks of "a Lamb with the marks of slaughter upon him." Later, the myriads around him declare, "Worthy is the Lamb, the Lamb that was slain, to receive all power and wealth, wisdom and might, honour and glory and praise." (Rev. 4:12)

Again, in order to understand the full force of the image in this familiar passage, it is necessary to detach ourselves somewhat from the context in which we usually hear of the "Lamb of God." The Lamb is worthy because it is slain. The allusion to the slain lamb, of course, points to the sacrificial rites of Hebraism (with equivalents in other religions) which the sacrifice of Jesus has replaced. But the slain lambs of Hebraic sacrifice, and the slain lambs of the Passover, were slain also for <u>food</u>: and in this way their death is linked to the death of all live things which have given up their lives for others. It does not diminish the strength of this passage to see in it an honoring of that necessity of creation whereby all physical life feeds on other life. Worthy are all lambs, all victims of the world's carniverosity, for out of their death comes life.

Such a reading of this passage is reinforced by the fact--some might say the paradox--that the Christ who is spoken of here as a lamb, and thus the victim, the killed one, is, in the same passage, spoken of as the lion. In the millenial imagery of Isaiah we are told that lions and lambs shall lie down together; but here the two are imaged as a unity. The lion remains a carnivore, and the lamb remains a victim, yet both are seen in one person: the Word who creates and endures the killing which, in our world, maintains lion and lamb, eater and eaten, in an intricate unity.

Robert Farrar Capon has recognized the importance of this paradox in the book of Revelation:

> Endless smoke now rising
> Lion become priest
> And lamb victim
> The world awaits
> The unimaginable union
> By which the Lion lifts himself Lamb slain
> And, Priest and Victim
> Brings
> The City
> Home.[28]

The importance of those words is not so much that they sum up the redemptive imagery of the Bible, but that they do so within the pages of a cookbook: significantly and reverently titled, The Supper of the Lamb.

For this image of the feast is the culminating image of the Bible: "Happy are those who are invited to the wedding-supper of the Lamb." As God has spread a feast at the beginning of human history, in Eden, so at the end he spreads a feast for the redeemed children of Adam. But now, both the pain and the glory of that feast are clearly evident. Both are contained in that creative word which, Christians have always said, sustains all life. The image of priest-lion and victim-lamb in one figure is itself a kind of picture of the ecosystem: a living unity sustained by death.

To sum up: From beginning to end, God's goodness is mediated to his people through eating. More than is usually recognized, the Bible affirms the importance of the unity of life: the food chain. As Schmemann says,

> This image of the banquet remains, throughout the Bible, the central image of life. It is the image of life at its creation, and also the image of life at its end and fulfillment: ". . .that you eat and drink at my table in my kingdom."[29]

Before concluding with a look at a theological vision in which the foregoing reading of Biblical imagery may be focussed, I would like to suggest three things I am not saying, in an attempt to counter some of the misunderstandings that might arise from the position I have outlined.

First, the imagery of the Gospel according to John--particularly Jesus' identification of himself with the grain of wheat that dies in order to bring forth fruit--calls to mind the prominent "corn-king" pattern in the world's myths and religions. Such religions--and they range the world from ancient Egypt to the surviving remnants of contemporary aboriginal cultures--directly link the gods they worship with the vegetative cycles of sprouting, growth, harvest and decay--all those natural processes which control their own life and well-being.[30] Rites which depend on slaying a ritual animal or sacrificing a human victim in the place of the god may be seen in the rituals of many cultures. In all cases some resemblance can be seen between the ritual death and the death of Jesus.

The pattern is evident in the Osiris-worship of throwing a human sacrifice into the Nile, so that through this symbolic death the God would yearly rise again in the richness of the crops. The pattern of fertility-through-death is probably the ritual which lies behind those pierced deer and bison which have leapt for 30,000 years across the walls of caves in southern Europe: the fertility-through-death ritual is very old indeed. And since it reminds people of their unity with divinity by stressing the individual's participation in natural processes, such religion is often pointed to by critics of Christianity as a more healthy soil for modern man's seedling attempts to live in harmony with the earth and its life-death cycles.

Is Christianity then to be understood as another of the "corn-king" religions? C. S. Lewis, a student of mythology deeply sensitive to such archetypal patterns, has answered the question so eloquently that I am going to

quote at length from him. In the Christian story, says Lewis, both in the overall doctrine of the incarnation and in the specific event of the crucifixion-resurrection, we

> will recognize a pattern: a thing written all over the world. It is the pattern of all vegetable life. It must belittle itself into something hard, small and deathlike, it must fall into the ground: thence the new life reascends. Death and Re-birth--go down to go up--it is a key principle. Through this bottleneck, this belittlement, the highroad nearly always lies.[31]

Lewis goes on to discuss the appropriateness from the corn-king perspective, of the Lord's supper accounts:

> A "dying God"--the only dying God who might possibly be historical--holds bread, that is, corn, in His hand and says, "This is my body." Surely here, even if nowhere else. . .the truth must come out; the connection between this and the annual drama of the crops must be made.[32]

But, Lewis continues, neither Christ, nor his disciples, nor the thousands of devotional and theological commentators who have followed, make the connection which to us is so obvious.

Says Lewis, "The records, in fact, show us a Person who <u>enacts</u> the part of the Dying God, but whose thoughts and words remain quite outside the circle of religious ideas to which the Dying God belongs."[33] Jesus was a Jew, and a striking characteristic of Judaism is its resistance, in the most uncompromising terms, to any suggestion that God may be worshipped in nature. Some critics of the Christian influence on our view of the environment have pointed out this aspect of Hebrew monotheism: the wrath against "the groves": wooded areas where the gods were worshipped. The Jews were enjoined to destroy such idolatrous groves and, the critics say, Christians have continued in the tradition by cutting down groves ever since. Whatever the worth of that observation, it is plain that the clearest appearance in history of one who enacts the vegetative pattern of life through death does so among a people very unlikely to see him as a divine image of these natural powers. The reason, says Lewis, is that though (as the Psalms make plain) the Hebrew God is the God of nature, he is not a <u>nature-god</u>. The Hebrew-Christian view of God is that he is the <u>creator</u> of nature, and stands completely outside it.

How then can we understand the remarkable similarity between the acts and words of Jesus and the figure of the corn-king? Lewis gives a good answer:

> If there is such a God-beyond-nature, and if He descends to rise again, then we can understand why Christ is at once so like the Corn-King and so silent about him. He is like the Corn-King because the Corn-King is a portrait of Him. The similarity is not in the least unreal or accidental. For the Corn-King is derived (through human imagination) from the facts of Nature, and the facts of Nature from her Creator: the Death and Re-birth pattern is in her because it was first in Him.[34]

Pointing out the centrality of food-chain imagery in the Biblical accounts of the life of Christ does not therefore mean that Jesus was another "corn-king." Lewis suggests that the Biblical doctrines of creation and transcendence

point instead to the idea that in the Incarnate Christ we recognize the pattern in which the universe (and all life) is made and sustained. This in fact seems to be the teaching of the prologue to the Gospel of John, where Jesus is described as "The Word": the creating and ordering principle of the universe. The Biblical record presents us with a figure who speaks of Himself--and acts in such a way--as to demonstrate the idea that sacrificial death is necessary for true life.

Christians, for the most part, have not seen the implications of this aspect of the Incarnation. It has perhaps been because of the fear of lapsing into a kind of idolatry. The recognition of God as separate from nature was difficult to maintain among the Hebrews; it was equally difficult in the maze of nature- and mystery-religions in which the early Christians found themselves. Therefore, in the history of Christendom, the stress has been not on God's participation, through Christ, in nature, but on his separation from nature. Now it is time--in fact, long past time--for Christians to recognize the full implications of their declaration that the Word of God dwelt among them and died, for the life of the world.

For in Jesus Christians find not a "nature God" which enables them to participate in natural rhythms as (presumably) did the worshippers of Adonis, Osiris, or a thousand forgotten corn-gods. They find instead the God of Nature: its designer, maker and key. Again, Capon puts this magnificiently:

> Christ wins in every triumph and loses in every loss. Christ dies when a chicken dies, and rises when an egg hatches. He lies slain in the wreckage of all Aprils. He weeps in the ruins of all springs. This strange, savage, gorgeous world is the way it is because, incomprehensibly, that is his style. The Gospel of the Incarnation is preached, not so that we can tell men that the world now means something it didn't mean before, but so that they may finally learn what it has been about all along. We proclaim Christ crucified, the formless, uncomely Root Out of a Dry Ground, in order to show men, at the undesired roots of their own being, the Incarnate Word who is already there, making Jerusalem to flourish. We do not bring Jesus to people or people to Jesus. We preach the Word who sends their roots rain, whether they hear or whether they forbear.[35]

So much for the idea of Jesus as a "corn-king." A second problem which might be seen in this idea of Christ exemplifying the ecological principle of good death is the problem of the reality of evil. What of wars, murders, tortures, Cain rising up in the field against Abel, and all the host of evils which the children of Adam have worked upon each other? Are these too "good death" which we must learn to accept as a part of the harmonious balance of life? Of course not. To recognize that death might play a necessary part in a perfect creation is not to say that all deaths are good, or to deny the reality of that twisting of the will against goodness which Christianity calls sin. It may be true, however, that many of the world's needless deaths have been caused by our failure to recognize the necessity of death: by our insistence on always grasping the life which, Christians say, Jesus gave up as a lamb gives up its life at the slaughter.

Finally, a recognition of the necessity of death in a perfect creation does not mean a rejection of the hope of the resurrection. On the immediate level, in fact, a recognition that life comes from death is a kind of comfort, as Jesus apparently meant it to be when he spoke of his own death in terms of the vegetative cycle: "Except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die. . ." The hope of literal, conscious eternal life is clearly a part of Biblical doctrine. However, most important for the purposes of this study is the promise, not of resurrection, but of the abolishing of death: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes, there shall be an end to death, and to mourning and crying and pain; for the old order has passed away." (Rev. 21:4) Such a promise clearly refers to a place and time "beyond the walls of the world". It is part of a new heaven and a new earth: not a restored Eden, for there, as we have shown, there was eating and consequent death; instead, a new creation which, we may speculate, is completely outside the present space-time order, the inexorable demands of the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Of such a creation we cannot speak. But Christians must recognize that to say that death shall ultimately, in a new creation, be done away with, is not to say that death now, in the only world we know, is necessarily evil. The imagery of Biblical revelation, and the central fact of the Christian faith, declare otherwise. And it is this world, this fabric of lives sustained by the death of others, that Christians are asked to live in and care for. And they are asked to do so after the manner of Him whom they declare to be the Lamb of God, who gave Himself for the life of the world. It is with the further implications of that central sacrifice, that I conclude.

III. A Theology of Substitution

In suggesting a theological framework in which the exchanges necessary for life can be related to the central principles of Christianity, I will be drawing primarily on the work of Charles Williams, and secondarily on the thought of his best commentator, Mary McDermott Sheideler. Charles Williams, a twentieth-century Anglican poet, novelist, dramatist, critic, editor, and theologian is one of the most profoundly radical (in the sense of going to the roots) of twentieth-century Christian thinkers. Unfortunately, if his work is known at all in Christian and scholarly circles, it tends to be known only as the work of an obscure friend of C. S. Lewis. But despite his relative obscurity, Williams' works suggest, I believe, a way of seeing the ecological imagery of Scripture as part of the more commonly accepted Doctrine of Christendom.

Williams writes out of the Franciscan tradition, expressed most definitely in the work of Duns Scotus, that "the World exists for the Incarnation, rather than the Incarnation for the world. But the Incarnation became the redemption for the sake of the world."[36] That is, God chose to become Incarnate, to enter the life of his creation, independent of man's sin. Though this is not widely taught, it is a reasonable consequence of those several Christological passages which teach that Christ is the power and pattern through whom all things are made. At any rate, Williams' view is of a creation which God intended from the beginning to enter and energize. In that creation, says Sheideler,

> These active, different things existed in relationship with each other. Then as now, grass grew in the soil; the one depended upon the other in

> an orderly fashion. Fish inhabited the sea, and generated others of their kind in accordance with a pattern. Organic life consisted of a system of interdependencies. . .Living things found their nourishment outside themselves; in gathering food they altered the external world, withdrawing from it plants and other animals. In turn, when the elements of the world were ingested, they changed the composition of the body that received them. . .And God saw that it was good.[37]

This is a restatement of what we have already seen: the necessity of eating for life. Bertholt Brecht makes the same point, but with even broader implications, for he connects it with the Lord's supper:

> The significance of the Mass:
> As biological organisms we must all, irrespective of sex, age, intelligence, character, creed assimilate other lives in order to live. As conscious beings, the same holds true on the intellectual level: all learning is assimilation. As children of God, made in his image, we are required in turn voluntarily to surrender ourselves to being assimilated by our neighbors according to their needs.
> The slogan of Hell: Eat <u>or</u> be eaten.
> The slogan of Heaven: Eat <u>and</u> be eaten.[38]

As Sheideler says, "Williams called this play of interaction among separate entities, 'The Co-inherence'; he believed the source of its continuation and existence to be God, its basic principle of activity to be Exchange, and its fruits to be joy and love."

Co-Inherence and Exchange: these are the principles which the ecologist finds at the center of life. They are the principles also which Williams the theologican finds at the center of life. He states the principle clearly in one of his Arthurian poems:

> ". . .the everlasting house the soul discovers
> is always anothers; we must lose our own ends;
> we must always live in the habitation of our lovers,
> my friend's shelter for me, mine for him.
> . . .what is the city's breath?--
> dying each other's life, living each other's death.[39]

Williams quotes various representatives of this doctrine in the history of the Church: The Hermit St. Anthony, for example, who declares, "Your life and your death are with your neighbor."[40] Or, earlier, Felicitas, the second-century Carthaginian slave girl who replied to her captors, in anticipation of her death, "Then another will be in me who will suffer for me, as I shall suffer for him."[41] Williams points to the words of the Apostle Paul, "Bear you one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ"; and finally, he declares the source and pattern of this "way of exchange" to be in the substitutionary death of Christ himself:

> The substituion is hidden in the central mystery of Christendom, which Christendom itself has never understood, nor can.[42]

Williams sees the principles of co-inherence and exchange to be most valuable in the clarification and redemption of human relationships, with each other and with God. But it is clear both from his work, and from the science of ecology (as well as from the Biblical imagery of this study) that the principle of exchange extends beyond human relationships. It is present in the inter-relationship of all of creation, and was present, suggests Williams, in the divine decision to create the material universe.

This is in some ways not a pleasant view, for it unflinchingly places the blame for the pain of creation on God himself. Says Williams, "The awful responsibility of the First Cause remains with the First Cause. . .supernatural judgement or natural sequence, we return to the single cry that goes up against the Creator; it is but one variation on one theme: that he did create, that he was the First Cause."[43]

Sheideler restates this conclusion--that a good God is responsible for the pain that comes from co-inherence:

> Judaism and Christianity, however, did say "God" and they said "good." They noticed further that exchange is frequently difficult, demanding and painful, and that co-inherence results in destruction as well as in life. The carnivores prey upon other beasts and they die; herbivores destroy the--presumably innocent--lives of plants. An illimitable distress, if not agony, pervades this co-inherence.[44]

It is the undeniable presence of such violence in creation, and the impossibility of connecting it with sin, that has caused many to say that the Christian God cannot be good. And it has been, in part, the Christian's fear of somehow blaming God for evil which has resulted in Christendom's failure to acknowledge that He makes the food chain too, with all its intricate balance of one thing eating another.

There is unanswerable death and pain at every link of the great chain of life. Christians, says Williams, must learn to see that the suffering is to be exchanged and borne, and that the central figure in that exchange is Christ, "the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world." Father Capon, the Episcopal priest who has mediated so eloquently on the exchanges present in our eating, writes:

> Might not Incarnation be his response, not to the incidental irregularity of sin, but to the unhelpable presence of badness in creation? Perhaps in a world where, for admittedly inscrutable reasons, <u>victimization</u> is the reverse of the coin of being, his help consists in his continuous presence in all victims. At any rate, when he finally does show up in Jesus, that is how it seems to work. His much-heralded coming to put all things to rights ends badly. When the invisible hand that holds the stars finally does its triumphant restoring thing, it does nothing at all but hang there and bleed.[45]

To sum up: Christians have basis for believing that in the Incarnation God sustains the world, and that a necessary part of that world which God sustains is the bloody necessity of death: the means by which life sustains other life. We must eat in order to live. This is the principle which the

naturalist sees when he looks at nature and finds it "red in tooth and claw," full of corruption from death and dying. And to be sure, the exchange by which one thing becomes the food of another is rarely, if ever, voluntary: neither fish, nor rabbit, nor grass, nor man is likely to be led passively to the slaughter: all resist the death which links them to life.

And yet: the fundamental pattern, demonstrated by the Word, which Christians say, holds all things, devourer and devoured, is the principle of choosing to support another life, rather than our own. We see it often in love: it is, in fact, the purest demonstration of love. We see it often also in the family, and catch glimpses of it in the great lengths to which some animal parents will go to insure the survival of their offspring. But hardly ever do we see it informing our stewardship of the earth.

We are so used to thinking of this sacrifice of Christ in the abstract categories of sin and redemption that we fail to see that here is demonstrated the model which, if followed, could fill the earth with love. In our personal relationships we have all learned, or are learning, that to do all things for oneself leads to a kind of Hell, but to "live in the habitation of our lovers," and to open the houses of our being to them: that opens the way to Zion.

Thus the sacrificial death of Christ points to the fundamental exchange. It permits us to see how all the bloody exchanges which sustain life may be taken up into that great pattern of Co-inherence which Williams, following the Biblical writers, calls the city of God. It is now time for Christians to recognize that the City of God includes not just fellow humans, but all the rest of that creation which both ecologist and theologian declare is held together in a great pattern of co-inherent life.

Nowhere is that painful and glorious co-inherence declared more lucidly than in this poem by Galway Kinnell, a contemporary American poet. Titled "To Christ our Lord," the poem describes a north country boy who goes out before dawn in a cold and savage world where one thing hunts another, himself to hunt a goose for the Christmas meal. Later, while his father's long-winded grace chills the bird, the boy reflects on that killing:

> He had not wanted to shoot. The sound
> Of wings beating into the hushed morning
> Had stirred his love, and the things
> In his gloves froze, and he wondered,
> Even famishing, could he fire? Then he fired.
>
> Now the grace praised his wicked act. At its end
> The bird on the plate
> Stared at his stricken appetite.
> There had been nothing to do but surrender,
> To kill and to eat; he ate as he had killed, with wonder.
>
> At night on snowshoes on the drifting field
> He wondered again, for whom had love stirred?
> The stars glittered on the snow and nothing answered.
> Then the Swan spread her wings, cross of the cold north,
> The pattern and mirror of the acts of earth.[46]

It has not been given humanity the choice to eat without killing, nor has that choice been given to any living thing. But man can kill and eat with wonder and love, recognizing his place within the household of life. And the Christian has a basis for that exchange, in the Substitution which is at the center of his faith.

"The everlasting house the soul discovers," says Charles Williams, "is always anothers." It is a revealing coincidence that the word "ecology" is based on the Greek word oikos, which means household. It is thus appropriate for every meal to remind us that our community extends beyond the walls of our narrow home and encompasses the whole household of life. "Our home ground," says Capon, "remains what it has always been: bloody ground and holy ground at once."[47] That household of life is bloody, for life cannot be sustained apart from the assimilation of other life. But it is holy, for at the center of this substitution of one life for another, say Christians, is the Word of God who creates the world and suffers for--and with--it.

What does this mean, in practical action? Obviously, I am not recommending that we feed ourselves to vanishing wildlife, or throw ourselves on the compost pile for the greater good of the food chain. I am suggesting, rather, that the pattern for the City of God is evident in nature, and is the pattern of giving and receiving, of consuming and being consumed. We can recognize that pattern because its central figure is Christ, creator and sustainer of the world's life. A recognition of the identity and significance of that center cannot help but change our often selfish and destructive relationship to the rest of the household of life. We are used to making individual and corporate decisions in such a way as to maximize human life, at the expense of all other life. Forgetting that our bodily immortality lies in a new earth, we have sought, through the accumulation of personal and corporate possessions, to establish it here. We deny the goodness and necessity of death, and thus are cutting ourselves off, like a pruned branch from the vine which sustains us. A recognition that not all death is caused by sin might help us move towards our original vocation: stewards of life in that living garden of a planet which is created and sustained by the Christ who dies for its life.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac (New York: Ballantine, 1970), pp. 252-253.

[2]Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," in The Everlasting Universe, ed. by Lorne J. Forstner and John H. Todd (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Company, 1971), p.13.

[3]H.S.D. Cole, et al, Models of Doom: A Critique of the Limits to Growth (New York: Universe Books, 1973), p. 239. Here the authors of Limits to Growth reply to a variety of criticisms directed against their book.

[4]Annie Dillard, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974), p. 167. Citing Edwin Way Teale.

[5]Leopold, p. 253.

[6]Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1949), pp. 306-307.

[7]Dillard, p. 181.

[8]Charles Williams, He Came Down from Heaven and The Forgiveness of Sins (London: Faber and Faber, 1950), p. 30.

[9]This is the argument behind Heidegger's concept of Dasein in Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. by John Macquarie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, publishers, 1962).

[10]C. S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), p. 130.

[11]Robinson Jeffers, "The Bloody Sire," in The New Pocket Anthology of American Verse, ed. by Oscar Williams and revised by Hy Sobiloff (New York: Washington Square Books, 1972), p. 212.

[12]Robert Farrar Capon, The Third Peacock: A book about God and the problem of evil (New York: Image Books, 1972), p. 18.

[13]Alexander Schmemann, For the Life of the World (New York: National Student Christian Federation, 1963), p. 1.

[14]Williams, He Came Down from Heaven, p. 20.

[15]Mary McDermott Sheideler, The Theology of Romantic Love: A Study in the Writings of Charles Williams (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), p. 51.

FOOTNOTES (Continued)

[16]It can be argued that such an "alteration in knowledge" is in fact a basic condition of human existence, and that the Fall is a myth that expresses in narrative terms the ontology of human existence. Whatever the merit of that view (Tillich Systematic Theology, Vol. I is a good statement of it), I am treating it, and the whole Bible narrative as the record of "real" events.

[17]Williams, He Came Down from Heaven, p. 23.

[18]Owen Barfield, Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); Philip Wheelwright, The Burning Fountain: A Study in the Language of Symbolism (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1968); Roger Funk, Language, Hermeneutic and Word of God: The Problem of Language in the New Testament and Contemporary Theology (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1966).

[19]Owen Barfield, What Coleridge Thought (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), p. 157.

[20]Dorothy Sayers, The Man Born to Be King: A Play Cycle on the Life of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1943), p. 227.

[21]Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), p. 19.

[22]Morris, p. 115.

[23]Morris, p. 116.

[24]C. S. Lewis, Miracles (London: Fontana, 1960), p. 115.

[25]Lewis, Miracles, p. 141.

[26]Schmemann, p. 28.

[27]Cited in Morris, p. 593.

[28]Capon, The Supper of the Lamb (New York: Pocket Books, 1970), p. 49.

[29]Schmemann, p. 1.

[30]The best summary of these myths remains Frazer's Golden Bough. See Chapters 28-48 of Sir James George Frazer, The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion, Abridged edition (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951).

[31]Lewis, Miracles, p. 116.

[32]Miracles, p. 118.

FOOTNOTES (Continued)

[33]Miracles, p. 118.

[34]Miracles, p. 119.

[35]Robert Farrar Capon, Hunting the Divine Fox: Images and Mystery in Christian Faith (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), p. 114.

[36]Williams, "Fathers and Heretics," quoted in Sheideler, p. 67.

[37]Sheideler, p. 46.

[38]Bertholt Brecht in Whole Earth Epilog (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1974), p. 375.

[39]Charles Williams, "Bors to Elayne; on the King's Coins," from "The Region of Summer Stars" in Taliessin Through Logres (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), p. 63.

[40]Williams, The Descent of the Dove: A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), p. 46.

[41]Williams, Descent of the Dove, p. 28.

[42]Williams, Descent into Hell (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), p. 101.

[43]Williams, Forgiveness of Sins, p. 129.

[44]Sheideler, p. 48.

[45]Capon, Third Peacock, p. 91.

[46]Galway Kinnell, The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World: Poems 1946-1964 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), pp. 44-45.

[47]Capon, Supper of the Lamb, p. 43.